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# Virgil (70–19 BCE)

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## Virgil (70–19 BCE)

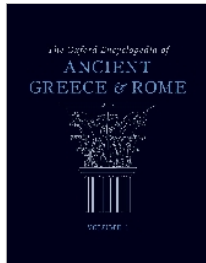
### **Abstract**

Roman poet. The biographical tradition for Virgil is extensive, including a few fantastic elements and stories probably invented to explain specific aspects of the poet's work. But there is no reason to doubt the attested dates of the poet's birth (15 October 70 bce) or death (21 September 19 bce). He was born near Mantua in a village called Andes. His father must have had money if he had his son educated at Cremona and then at Milan, as is attested. It is possible that the family, like many Transpadani (those who lived north of the River Po), had recently acquired equestrian rank from Julius Caesar; Caesarian politics is a theme throughout Virgil's oeuvre.

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## Virgil

(Publius Vergilius Maro, 70–19 BCE),

Roman poet. The biographical tradition for Virgil is extensive, including a few fantastic elements and stories probably invented to explain specific aspects of the poet's work. But there is no reason to doubt the attested dates of the poet's birth (15 October 70 BCE) or death (21 September 19 BCE). He was born near Mantua in a village called Andes. His father must have had money if he had his son educated at Cremona and then at Milan, as is attested. It is possible that the family, like many Transpadani (those who lived north of the River Po), had recently acquired equestrian rank from Julius Caesar; Caesarian politics is a theme throughout Virgil's oeuvre.

Virgil's poetic career must have been begun by 43 and continued uninterrupted until his death. Early works honor several of Caesar's followers (Gaius Asinius Pollio, Gaius Cornelius Gallus, and perhaps Alfenus Varus), alluding directly to Divus Julius and perhaps indirectly to Octavian, the future Augustus. By about 38, Virgil had sufficient influence with Gaius Maecenas, friend and adviser to Octavian, to secure Horace an introduction. Maecenas became the addressee of the *Georgics*, and Octavian constitutes a major theme in that poem. The hero of the *Aeneid* is represented as an ancestor of Augustus, who is again a major theme. In spite of his strong Caesarian connections, Virgil is said to have disliked the city of Rome and to have lived instead at Naples, where he may have been attached to an Epicurean community.

Virgil's poetry shows strong affinities with two rather different traditions. Alexandrian influence is evident in his formal polish, minute craftsmanship, occasionally oblique manner, and verbal sophistication. But technical virtuosity never obscures Virgil's commitment to serious political, religious, and philosophical themes. His blending of these traditions influenced later Roman and indeed European poetry.

Ancient scholarship recognized several poems in various genres (epigrams, parodies, miniature epics) as juvenilia or parerga. Collectively these poems form the *Appendix Vergiliana*. Some of these borrow from Virgil's canonical works and appear to have been composed after his death. Others cannot be dated, and a few may possibly come from the pen of Virgil himself.

Three works in the epic meter, dactylic hexameter, make up Virgil's canonical oeuvre: the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics*, and the *Aeneid*. Each is more substantial and ambitious than the one before it, and Virgil's progression from bucolic to didactic to heroic epic came to define the ideal poetic career. But within this pattern of linear ascent one finds a constant dialogue between humility and grandeur both as stylistic principle and as ethical perspective on human experience.

**Virgil.** Roman bust. MUSEI CAPITOLINI,  
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## **The *Eclogues*, or *Bucolics*.**

The attested titles of the first work, *Eclogues* and *Bucolics*, both come from the Greek: *eklogai* means “selections,” and *boukolika* means “songs of herdsmen.” The literary background of these poems is a sophisticated, even precious genre of Greek poetry. Their social background is the Italian civil war of 43 BCE and its aftermath. Tension between these two backgrounds is what animates the collection.

Theocritus of Syracuse (first half of the third century BCE) composed his idylls about an idealized world of rustics whose sole occupations are tending flocks, falling in love, and singing. He fashioned this world in pointed contrast to the inimitably grand universe of Homer's epic heroes and the urbane courts of Dionysius at Syracuse and Ptolemy at Alexandria. Virgil's *Eclogues* create a different contrast between rustic simplicity and a “heroic” but skeptically regarded political reality centered in and emanating from Rome. Eight of the ten *Eclogues* (1–3, 5, 7–10) use specific Theocritean models to define a bucolic world. What distinguishes Virgil's world are the forces that threaten to tear it apart, and the shepherds' anxious uncertainty about what is happening to them.

There is little plot in the *Eclogues*. The sequence of poems gradually creates a world by introducing a succession of interdependent themes and motifs that are reinforced by repetition:

- 1.** A dialogue between a pair of rustics, Meliboeus, who is traveling into exile because a soldier has seized his lands, and Tityrus, who has avoided this fate by going to the city of Rome and appealing to a deified but unnamed youth (Caesar Octavianus?) who allows him to return to the country.
- 2.** A monologue in which the rustic Corydon confesses his unrequited love in a song about the beautiful boy Alexis, offering gifts and inviting him to leave the city and come live in the country.
- 3.** A dialogue between a pair of rustics, Menalcas and Damoetas, who quarrel and then try to settle their differences in a singing contest, exchanging wagers; but the contest is judged a draw. Pollio is mentioned as both poet and patron.
- 4.** A monologue in which the Sicilian Muses are asked to sing a more elevated theme, the birth of a marvelous child during Pollio's consulate heralding the return of a golden age.
- 5.** A dialogue between a pair of rustics, Menalcas and Mopsus, who sing in honor of the pastoral hero Daphnis, who has died. (A reference to the deification of Julius Caesar?) When they exchange gifts, Menalcas gives Mopsus the pipes that he played when singing poems 2 and 3.
- 6.** A monologue in which Tityrus, whose Muse was the first to sing Syracusan (i.e., Sicilian) pastoral, refuses to sing a more elevated theme, the military exploits of his patron Varus. Instead he recounts a song by Silenus that encompasses all of Greek mythology. Cornelius Gallus receives a set of pipes and becomes a poet of etiological elegy in the manner of Callimachus, author of the *Aeita* (Causes, or Origins).
- 7.** A monologue in which Meliboeus recounts a contest in which Corydon beats Thyrsis.
- 8.** A monologue by an unnamed narrator who recounts a pair of songs. Damon recounts an unnamed rustic's confession of unrequited love. Alphesiboeus recounts the song of a girl who uses magic incantations to make Daphnis leave the city and return to the country. An unnamed addressee (Pollio?) is praised for his military exploits and his poetry in the style of Sophocles.
- 9.** A dialogue between a pair of rustics, Lycidas and Moeris, who go to the city discussing the ongoing land confiscations and exchanging snippets of song.
- 10.** Cornelius Gallus confesses his unrequited love in a song about abandoning elegiac poetry and coming to live in the country.

Individual themes and motifs, resonant in themselves—such as the country, song, love, or Arcadia—through repetition gain significance in combination with one another. Thus the very simple paired themes of coming and going appear in connection with those of city and country (*passim*), but also with those of love (2, 8, 9) and exile (1). The country is further associated with song (*passim*)—a central concern of these poems—but it is threatened by soldiers, who force the rustics off their land (1, 9) and cause them to forget their songs (9). These themes gain further

specificity from the introduction of historical figures, whose position in the pastoral world is both crucial and yet somewhat marginal: Tityrus dedicates a poem to the soldier Varus, but he refuses to sing his martial exploits (6). An unnamed narrator praises a patron both as a poet and as a soldier, but leaves him unnamed (8; the patron is probably Pollio). The value of poetry or song thus emerges as perhaps the major theme of the *Eclogues*. The shifting combinations of themes outline a magic-realist world that is at once mythical and historical, Sicilian (4, 6) and Italian (1, 5, 9), as well as Arcadian (4, 6, 7, 8, 10)—a world created solely through the power of poetry, but one in which poets are powerless against soldiers.

Within this predominantly bucolic collection, *Eclogues* 4 and 6, both couched as inspired utterances, look explicitly beyond the boundaries of the genre. The fourth *Eclogue*, the “Messianic” *Eclogue*, was thought by early Christians to have foretold the birth of Jesus. This poem predicts birth of a marvelous child, under whose heroic leadership the golden age will return. This motif anticipates the propaganda of the later Augustan regime, but it is better to regard the poem not as a specific allegory but as a mythopoeic essay with broad relevance to contemporary events, and as a curious complement to the prevailing theme of the decay of the bucolic world. *Eclogue* 6 surpasses even *Eclogue* 4 in its scope, beginning as a simple rustic mime but ending as a universal history of Greek myth from elemental cosmogony to the end of the Trojan War. As such, despite modest dimensions, this eclogue's structure invites comparison with Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

The arrangement of the book of *Eclogues* is elaborate. Pairs of formally and thematically related poems (1 and 9, 2 and 8, 3 and 7, 4 and 6) are arranged concentrically around poem 5, which concludes the first half of the collection, just as poem 10 concludes the second half. Division into halves is emphasized by formal criteria: citation of poems 2 and 3 at the end of the first half (5.86–87), a new proem to begin the second half (6.1–12), and increased importance of Arcadia as a theme in the second half, which is framed by appearances of Gallus, who seems to represent some aspect of Virgil's ambitions beyond bucolic poetry, in 6 and 10.

Virgil was not content to work within the confines of the genre that he inherited from Theocritus, but rather was attracted by the possibility of putting an idyllic realm of Greek poetic imagination into dialogue with the contemporary realities of Roman civil strife. This approach inspired later poets, for whom bucolic poetry remained a means of examining the competing claims of engagement and retirement, politics and culture, striving and repose. In this tradition poetry becomes both a medium for meditating on these relationships and also a thing in itself: a symbol for a way of life that is in danger of being lost.

## The *Georgics*.

Like the *Eclogues*, Virgil's next work—the title *Georgics* derives from the Greek *geōrgika*, “farming,” or “songs for farmers”—idealizes country life, saying nothing for instance about slave labor, an indispensable element of ancient Mediterranean agriculture. But the poem does not shrink from considering labor per se, drawing upon the image of the industrious, independent farmer as a Roman or Italian national myth. For the Romans, exemplary tales like that of the fifth-century (temporary) dictator Cincinnatus returning to his plow and literary monuments like Cato the Elder's *De agri cultura* (c.160 BCE) emphasized the moral virtues and practical aspects of farming. The *Georgics* draws deeply on this reservoir of cultural significance. But again like the *Eclogues*, the work adopts an invention of the Hellenistic period, “metaphrastic didactic” poetry—that is, a poetic paraphrase of a technical treatise. For Virgil, it was Varro's recently

published dialogue *De re rustica* (On Farming, 37 BCE) that provided both the immediate impetus and an authoritative prose source for a foray into this genre.

Virgil developed his material in a way that endowed the poem with a strong sense of forward movement.

Book 1, after a major hymnic invocation, addresses the preparation of the land for planting, the care of field crops, the best days for performing specific chores, and how to predict the weather. Digressions on the origin and meaning of labor and on the providential design of the world conclude major didactic sections, just as the book as a whole ends with an outcry against the distress of the countryside in civil strife.

Book 2, with only minor preliminaries, discusses the care of orchards, including vines and olives. As in book 1, there are two major digressions and a conclusion, all in this case devoted to the theme of praise—of Italy, of spring, and of country life. The finale meditates on the similarities and differences between the life of the philosopher and the life of the farmer, as well as on the poet's relationship to each.

Book 3 offers another ambitious proem: the poet imagines building a temple in honor of Caesar's victories. The subject is large animals, including their breeding, youth, old age, and illnesses. The extremely pessimistic ending narrates the devastating (though fictional) plague of Noricum, a passage modeled on the plagues described by Thucydides and especially Lucretius.

Book 4, like book 2, moves briskly into its subject, beekeeping. Human analogies are again evident in the description of the hive as a cooperative community, even a civilized state. The bees are unlike the animals of book 3 in some ways (they reproduce asexually), but they are like them in that they are vulnerable to disease, which includes political stress. If necessary a new hive can be generated from the carcass of a bull by a technique (the *bougonia*) invented by the hero Aristaeus, whose hive perished because he had brought about the death of Eurydice, Orpheus' beloved. Orpheus' failure to bring Eurydice back to life is contrasted with Aristaeus' success in replacing his lost hive. The end of the poem, a *sphragis*—that is, a “seal” or poetic signature—that cites line 1 of the *Eclogues*, contrasts Caesar's heroic exploits with Virgil's life of poetic seclusion.

Successive topics describe an upward trajectory from earth to sky and a movement from inanimate to increasingly animate things. This progression is accompanied by an increasing tendency to humanize the poem's subject matter. In the early books man is alternately nature's opponent or its beneficiary in field or orchard. In the later books the cattle and bees that man tends come increasingly to resemble their masters: in book 3 the erotic urges of cattle are illustrated by comparison to the myth of Hero and Leander, while in book 4 Virgil goes so far as to call bees “Quirites”—in effect calling them Roman citizens. An alternation of tone between the odd- and even-numbered books is another notable pattern. Book 1 is quite pessimistic and ends on a very sobering note, the assassination of Julius Caesar and the outbreak of civil war. Book 2 by contrast begins cheerfully and becomes even more so, culminating in a lengthy passage in praise of the farmer's life (458–474). In book 3 the mood turns somber again as Virgil dwells first on the danger of sexual passion in the animals and then on their susceptibility to disease. In book 4 a more cheerful tone returns as Virgil describes in mock-epic terms the society of the bees, the self-sufficiency of a reclusive immigrant gardener, and the myth of the *bougonia* mentioned above. A careful balance between pessimism and optimism and between darkness

and lightness of tone pervades the poem, but the vector of movement seems to encourage the reader from near despair toward a measure of hope.

No single, dominant literary predecessor stands behind the *Georgics*. The general order of topics—field crops and trees, animal husbandry, gardening, and beekeeping—follows Varro. Several framing passages closely engage Varro as well, such as the hymn to rustic deities (1.1–23, which corresponds to *De re rustica* 1.1.1–7) and the “Praises of Italy” (2.136–176, which corresponds to *De re rustica* 1.2.1–8). But book 1 is modeled extensively on Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, and book 4 ends with an ambitious imitation of Homer. These two founding fathers of Greek poetry were often taken to represent opposing traditions, but Virgil’s deployment of other poetic models—Aratus, Callimachus, Lucretius; hymns, victory odes, miniature epics, etiological elegies—throughout the poem attests his effort to integrate the two traditions by investing didactic epic (Hesiod) with heroic grandeur and by interpreting heroic epic (Homer) as an allegorized form of natural philosophy. Each of these sources retains its characteristic features but is seamlessly integrated into a poem of extraordinarily refined finish.

The primary theme of working the earth is developed in such a way that it gains enormous scientific, philosophical, religious, and sociohistorical resonance. Simple procedures like plowing and irrigating are mapped onto the four-element theory of natural philosophy (earth, air, fire, water). The seasonal cycle of preparation, planting, growth, harvest, and dormancy is viewed against the life cycle of individuals, peoples, and societies. Frequent mention of the civil wars of the 40s and 30s BCE, the assassination of Caesar, and the preeminent position of Caesar’s heir make it clear that the possibility of social rebirth at the particular moment when the poem appeared is among its most urgent themes. But these issues are examined against a universalizing background that considers humankind’s battle for survival, relationship to the divine, and other basic human concerns that transcend the immediate moment of the poem’s production and initial reception.

The *Georgics* relates the farmer’s most humble tasks to issues of cosmic importance. In doing so the poem frequently incorporates elements of a panegyric to a ruler, with Augustus—or Caesar, as he was called at this time—at the center of such passages. Godlike in stature and power, he is the guarantor of the peaceful conditions that must prevail if Virgil’s readers—within the poem’s fiction, stout yeoman farmers, but in reality citizens who have lived through the civil wars—are to succeed in rebuilding Roman society. But Caesar is in another sense too large a figure for such a poem; and within it Virgil offers a vision of what he might do in the future to comprehend this hero in artistic form. The Marble Temple that the poet says he will build on the banks of the river Mincius—that is, near his boyhood home in Mantua—will celebrate Caesar’s victories. Virgil’s *ekphrasis*, or description, of this imaginary temple draws on the conventions of epinician poetry (that is, songs of victory) but has also been taken as prefiguring a heroic epic. In specific terms the temple corresponds only approximately to the *Aeneid*. But the passage clearly registers transcendence of genre as a theme in the *Georgics* and so anticipates Virgil’s future endeavors.

The *Georgics* is an elegant and sophisticated literary treatment of a deliberately “unpromising” topic. It integrates literary traditions in a way that opened up new possibilities for Virgil and for every Roman poet who followed him. Most important, it strikes an exquisite balance between the anxiety that pervaded Roman society after several generations of civil war and a hope that the final battles had been fought, that a hard-won peace would last, and that a new birth might be possible. In many ways the *Georgics* suggests that this balance will tilt one way or another as a result of choices that Caesar alone can make—choices figured in the opening hymn as a decision



over what kind of god Caesar will become, what province he will choose for himself, as Jupiter, Neptune, and Dis had partitioned the world after overthrowing the Titans.

## The *Aeneid*.

Virgil's epic the *Aeneid* traces the ancestry of the Roman people and their ruling dynasty, the *gens Julia*, back to the hero Aeneas, son of the goddess Venus and the Trojan prince Anchises. The *Aeneid* is by design a national epic, an expression of the core values of the Roman people as seen in the sufferings and achievements of a founding hero. It is at the same time indebted to Hellenistic traditions of ruler panegyric. But in neither sense does it approach its subject uncritically. In the person of Aeneas the defining qualities of the Roman people and their leader are both celebrated and questioned against the most profound issues in the human experience: justice, perseverance, love, loyalty, mercy, and sacrifice. Virgil's success in giving artistic form to these issues has made the *Aeneid* for centuries a touchstone of excellence in humane literature—even, according to T. S. Eliot, “the classic of all Europe.” But especially since the mid-twentieth century, no poem of classical antiquity has divided its devoted interpreters so sharply over the question of its ultimate meaning.

### Epic Tradition.

Virgil's own literary ambitions in the *Aeneid* are as heroic as the accomplishments of Aeneas or of Augustus in their own spheres. By writing a poem that would give the Roman people a national epic rivaling those of the Greeks, Virgil invited direct comparison between himself and Homer as no poet had ever done before. The *Aeneid* is designed along the same general lines as the Homeric poems, containing all the essential ingredients of heroic epic narrated in an elevated style that is redolent of archaic ritual. It also borrows and adapts an enormous quantity of material—ranging from individual words and phrases to quite substantial narrative structures—directly from Homer. Aeneas' adventures in the first six of the twelve books are based mainly on the wanderings of Odysseus, whereas the second half of the poem alludes constantly to the military adventures of Achilles. Very frequently, and in principle always, perception of the specific Homeric background to which Virgil alludes is central to understanding his meaning. Other epic models include Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, organized into four books, which showed how the sheer amplitude of Homeric epic might be scaled down to suit a more sophisticated age's taste and standards of poetic craftsmanship. In addition, Apollonius' hero Jason greatly complicated the heroic paradigm established by Homer, and his heroine Medea, a princess from Colchis, established romantic love as a powerful epic theme.

Early Roman epic began with a translation of the *Odyssey* by Lucius Livius Andronicus, but it developed into a predominantly historical genre. Gnaeus Naevius wrote an epic that survives only in fragments about the First Punic War in which Aeneas and his Trojan refugees may have appeared at the court of Dido, the queen of Carthage. This episode may have explained the enmity of Rome and Carthage in Naevius' own time. Quintus Ennius incorporated the Aeneas legend into an epic of Roman history from the fall of Troy down to the poet's time. Although Virgil departed from Naevius' and Ennius' treatments of Aeneas, he followed them in developing a complex, explicit relationship between myth and history—something that is not found in Homer or Apollonius. He also drew upon Naevius' and Ennius' pioneering efforts to create an elevated literary Latin suited to the genre.

Virgil's intertextual style, with references to earlier epics, enriches the reader's experience and opens the poem to interpretive possibilities. For instance, when Aeneas is driven by storm to the coast of Africa, the reader is given clear signals that this landing could correspond to at least three in the *Odyssey*—Scheria, home of the Phaeacians; Aea, Circe's island; or Ithaca, Odysseus' home—not to mention Jason's landing at Colchis in the *Argonautica*. These multiple points of reference underline the reader's uncertainty whether Dido, the woman Aeneas encounters in Africa, resembles the principal female inhabitant of only one of these islands (Arete, the powerful queen; Circe, the witch; or Penelope, the faithful wife) or is perhaps some mysterious combination of all three (Medea).

The Aeneas legend varied widely before Virgil's time. In the *Iliad*, Aeneas is an important Trojan warrior with a grievance against the house of Priam, and a tradition preserved by a late source (possibly acknowledged by Virgil at 1.498) held that Aeneas betrayed Troy to the Greeks. According to other authorities Aeneas himself founded Rome (sometimes in cooperation with Odysseus!). In still other versions Aeneas brought the Trojans to Italy but left it to his descendants to found Rome. Virgil synthesizes details drawn from alternate and even incompatible versions, whether to signal that he rejects them or to encourage the free play of the reader's imagination. In the process he links Aeneas to his Roman and Julian descendants, bridging a wide gap between the traditional dates for the fall of Troy (1153 BCE) and the founding of Rome (753 BCE). His solution creates a richly textured account that steers a middle course between a single-minded, authorized version and the welter of competing versions with which tradition had presented him.

## Plot.

Following Aristotle, Virgil focuses on a single hero but does not tell the story of his entire life. He begins in medias res, making use (as Homer did in the *Odyssey*) of the hero as a narrator within the story to inform the reader about prior events. The full range of divine characters appears; typical scenes of banqueting, speechmaking, and formal combat, along with elaborate similes, catalogs, and the poet's invocations of the Muse, are all in evidence. Virgil sparingly imitates the repetitive or formulaic quality of Homer's narrative, usually combining several similar Homeric scenes into a single episode. In this way he was able to condense the combined forty-eight books of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into the twelve of the *Aeneid*.

1. As Aeneas sails from Sicily toward Italy, Juno raises a storm that drives him to the coast of Libya, where he is received by Dido, queen of Carthage.
2. Aeneas tells Dido of his adventures, beginning with the sack of Troy.

3. He continues with the seven years spent wandering in an effort to reach Italy.
4. Under the combined influence of Venus and Juno, Dido has an affair with Aeneas. When the hero resumes his fated voyage, Dido becomes distraught and commits suicide.
5. Landing on Sicily, the men hold memorial games for Aeneas' father, Anchises, who in a dream vision summons Aeneas to the Underworld.
6. Guided by the Sibyl of Cumae, Aeneas goes to the Underworld, where he encounters the shades of people from his past. In Elysium he converses with Anchises and witnesses a pageant of souls waiting to be born as the great heroes of Roman history.
7. Aeneas lands in Latium and requests the hand of Lavinia, daughter of King Latinus, in marriage. Turnus, a suitor of Lavinia, is incited by Juno to make war against Aeneas.
8. Aeneas makes an alliance with Evander, king of an Arcadian settlement on the future site of Rome. Evander's son Pallas leads a contingent in support of Aeneas.
9. In Aeneas' absence Turnus pins the Trojans in their camp. An effort to summon Aeneas ends in disaster.
10. Aeneas returns and strengthens the Trojans. Turnus slays Pallas in single combat. Aeneas, enraged, dispatches many enemies.
11. Aeneas buries Pallas while the Italians debate suing for peace, but Turnus will not surrender. A woman warrior, Camilla, leads the resistance, but when she is killed the tide of battle turns, leaving Turnus alone.
12. As preparations are made for a final duel between Aeneas and Turnus, Jupiter convinces Juno to abandon Turnus. She agrees, but obtains certain conditions that work to the Trojans' disadvantage. Aeneas is then able to slay Turnus in single combat.

## Gods.

Virgil's gods behave as readers of Homer would expect, intervening in the plot on behalf of their favorites, and they make available to the reader a wider perspective than is normally accessible to the human characters. In addition, the gods' actions reflect the roles that they played in Roman religious, political, and military history. Cosmic disorder is reflected primarily in the opposition between the goddesses Juno and Venus. Juno (like the Homeric Hera) hates the Trojans and loves the Greeks; what is more (like her Punic counterpart, Tanit), she loves Carthage as well. She bribes lesser divinities (such as Aeolus, king of the winds, in book 1) to overstep their authority in helping her persecute Aeneas, and she even resorts to using infernal agents, such as the Fury Allecto in book 7. Venus, the Roman counterpart to the Greek Aphrodite, is the hero's mother as well as his divine patron. She is thus naturally well-disposed toward the Trojans, and the reader often sees her work on behalf of Aeneas, who nevertheless resents her aloofness.

Jupiter stands above all other gods as arbiter among them and as guarantor of Fate. It is he who reveals to Venus that the Trojans will reach Italy, that Iulus will found a line of Latin kings, and that his descendants, Romulus and Augustus, will rule at Rome. But Jupiter's conception of

Fate is rather elastic, especially toward the end of the poem when Juno agrees to abandon her opposition to Aeneas only if Jupiter promises that the nation Aeneas founds will be Italian, Latin, and Roman, and that every trace of Troy will be eradicated. Jupiter agrees, dispatching a Dira—one of two birdlike creatures (associated with the Erinyes in Greek myth) that, like his eagle, roosts beneath his throne—to bewilder Turnus as he girds himself for the final combat with Aeneas. The requirements of Fate are satisfied, but Jupiter's willingness to bargain with Juno and his association (recalling hers) with infernal powers call into question what seem elsewhere like basic, clear distinctions between male and female, reason and passion, heaven and hell. More than Homer, then, Virgil reflects upon and questions the gods' purposes and motives. In one sense, of course, these facts mirror the skepticism of a society that is no longer governed by archaic religious beliefs; in another, the gods have gained depth and sophistication over the eight centuries or so of human experience that separate Virgil's world from Homer's.

The gods influence human action, but by the traditional epic principle of dual motivation, whatever mortal characters do can also be explained in purely human terms. Aeneas is characterized by a strong sense of duty (*pietas*) toward everyone around him (family, followers, and above all the gods) more than by any inner motivation. As the poem begins, the hero wishes he were dead, and his narration of the sack of Troy traces this death wish to the loss of his city. Only gradually does he realize what heaven requires of him. Longing to end his wanderings, he finds the rising city of Carthage with its beautiful queen, Dido, an irresistible temptation. But he eventually becomes more resolute and forward-looking. His Underworld experiences seem decisive: after his return he acts with more authority in war than he had on the sea, a better Achilles than he was an Odysseus. This change in Aeneas is related to the delineation of Dido and Turnus, the two characters who are his most important foils in the first and second halves of the poem, respectively.

### **Aeneas' Foils.**

For many readers, the key to Aeneas' character is his behavior toward Dido: does his *pietas* not extend to the woman who received him and his people when they were destitute, and whose bed he shared during his stay in Carthage? This episode is a low point in the development of Aeneas' character. But both he and Dido are the playthings of heaven—Dido especially. Aeneas, for his part, must leave: Jupiter sends Mercury down from Olympus to rouse him into action. Dido meanwhile has been manipulated by divine forces from the beginning. First Jupiter (via Mercury), then Venus, and then even Juno conspires to make Dido and her Carthaginians serve the Trojans' purposes. Aeneas follows the road that the gods have paved for him; Dido is made to behave against her nature and her interests. A young widow, she has sworn never to remarry. A heroic leader who has overcome personal tragedy, she has so far put the interests of her people ahead of her own. With the end of the affair, she becomes distraught, goes mad, and eventually takes her own life. For many readers the destruction of such a sympathetic character is a severe reproach to Aeneas and even more to the gods.

Turnus, too, is an instrument of Juno's opposition to Aeneas. Like Dido, he is in certain ways Aeneas' double. But where Dido presents a model of royal behavior for Aeneas to emulate, Turnus is a would-be Aeneas. Turnus believes that he is himself the foreign prince to whom Lavinia must be married; he even sees himself as "a new Achilles, born in Latium, also born of a goddess" that had been foretold by the Cumaean Sibyl, failing to understand that this is the role assigned by fate to Aeneas. Only at the very end, as these delusions fade and Turnus recognizes that the gods are against him, does he elicit the reader's pity.

## Arma Virumque Cano...

The *Aeneid* further develops themes that had informed Virgil's earlier works and combines them with new ideas, consistently eliciting complex reactions toward all of its major themes. The poem's first word is *arma*, "arms," and its hero is an accomplished if reluctant warrior. Once arrived in Italy, Aeneas attempts to make peace with the natives, but when driven to war he succumbs on occasion to a battle fury that threatens to alienate the reader's sympathy. The poem thus does not merely celebrate martial prowess, it also questions its moral value—inevitably with reference to the civil wars that had brought Augustus to power. The poem's second word is *virum*, "man," not in the unmarked, generic sense of "human being" (*homo*), but in a marked sense with respect to gender (male) and status (gentleman; hero). Aeneas' fate is dominated by the favor or opposition of women: he is the son of Venus, is hated by Juno, is saved by Dido, is betrayed by the Trojan mothers, is illuminated by the Cumaean Sibyl, and is destined to marry Lavinia—over the frenzied opposition of her mother, Amata. Aeneas' heroism, then, is bound up in his maleness, as is emphasized by the fates of those would-be heroic women, Dido and Camilla. At every turn the problems that confront him are caused by female characters.

But it remains a question throughout the poem what kind of hero Aeneas is—another Odysseus? another Achilles? a would-be hero, like Jason?—and therefore what kind of man he is. He evidently wishes (as is suggested, for instance, in his final words to Iulus, 12.435–440) to be a Homeric hero, specifically Hector, who died nobly fighting for his city. But fate requires something else of him, and whether he ever comes fully to understand what is expected of him is a question that has been debated by critics. That during the sack of Troy he contemplates murdering a defenseless Helen (in a passage of uncertain authenticity, however), then in escaping manages to lose his wife, compounded by the fact that he narrates these unfortunate moments to Dido, whose hospitality and bed he enjoys for several months before trying to slip out of town unnoticed—all this amounts to a profound questioning of the traditional heroic ethos, and arguably of the patriarchal structures of Roman society. One must even ask to what extent Aeneas' shortcomings reflect on his descendant, Augustus. The overtly panegyric qualities of the poem are thus in dialogue with a perspective that many critics regard as profoundly tragic. According to some scholars, this tragic perspective undermines the panegyric element; according to others, it reinforces the panegyric element by tempering triumphalism with a humane sense of victory's cost.

Epic heroes each have their single most salient characteristic: Achilles' anger, Odysseus' guile. Aeneas' so-called perpetual epithet is *pius*—best translated as "dutiful" rather than as "pious" in the religious sense. Pius Aeneas seldom acts on impulse or for immediate self-gratification. But inevitably conflicts arise, both between duty (the necessity that he abandon Troy) and instinct (his preference to die fighting for the lost city) and between various incompatible duties, such as the necessity that he abandon Dido and the enormous debt—to say nothing of the love—that he owes her. It is questionable whether these conflicts ever are or ever can be resolved; few readers have felt that Aeneas' accomplishments bring him personally a sense of fulfillment.

Although Aeneas' *pietas* is not our idea of "piety," both he and nearly everything he does are surrounded with an aura of religiosity. Crucially, he takes not only his people to Italy but also the Trojan Penates, or household gods, which eventually will take their place within the Roman state cult. In addition many of his incidental acts are cited as the origin of some religious practice current in Virgil's own time. These include the origins of the Parentalia festival (book

5), of the display of ancestral portraits in an aristocratic funeral (book 6), of the opening and closing of the temple of Janus in time of war or peace (book 7), and of the cult of Hercules at the Ara Maxima (book 8). These antiquarian gestures comport with Augustus' own attempt to celebrate traditional Roman religion by rebuilding temples and reviving disused practices. A religious coloring appears in significant details as well, as when Aeneas describes the killing of Turnus by using a term of sacrificial ritual (*immolat*, 12.949). Here it is unclear, however, whether Aeneas' choice of words justifies the act or whether he is using religion to mask motives that are in fact rooted in a personal desire for vengeance; it is on the reader's judgment about such things that interpretation of the entire poem often turns.

The plot of the *Aeneid* is dictated by fate: Aeneas must leave Troy, he must leave Carthage, and he must reach Italy. In book 1, Jupiter delivers a lengthy prophecy informing Venus that this must happen so that, 1,100 years in the future, Augustus may put an end to civil war and rule Rome in peace. Further revelations in books 6 (Aeneas' review of the Roman heroes) and 8 (the scenes depicted on the shield made for him by Vulcan) confirm and develop this prophecy and affirm its Augustan focus. The epic narrator evidently shares in the triumphalist perspective of such passages, most notably perhaps in the majestic first sentence of book 1 (lines 1–7). But as the narrator turns to invoke the Muse in the following four lines, his tone becomes more brooding. Why, he asks, did the queen of the gods persecute a good man like Aeneas?—are gods really governed by anger on that scale? The poem that follows is in many ways a dialogue between these two perspectives, the triumphalist and the questioning. And just as it is often the gods—as in Jupiter's prophecy, for example—who speak most clearly for the triumphalist perspective, so it is the gods' actions that give urgency to the narrator's question.

### **End of the *Aeneid* and Virgil's death.**

The final combat with Turnus ends, as it must, in victory for Aeneas. But if the victory is decisive, its moral implications are not. The reader has witnessed Jupiter and Juno's agreement to end hostilities. Juno abandons Turnus, and Jupiter sends his Dira to mark Turnus for death. Turnus enters battle knowing that the gods are against him. He will be no match for Aeneas. Turnus has never seemed Aeneas' equal, either physically or morally, but in abandonment even by his sister at the final hour, he regains the humanity that the Fury Allecto drove from him when he first entered the narrative. Despite the terrible odds, however, Turnus is not killed outright: Aeneas hobbles him with a cast of his spear and must finish him off at close quarters. This gives Turnus a chance to plead for his life, and he plays upon Aeneas' famed *pietas*, reminding him of Turnus' aged father, Daunus, and of Aeneas' own father, Anchises. His words carry weight: perhaps (the reader can surmise) Aeneas remembers Anchises' injunction "to spare the defeated and battle down the proud." Turnus may be guileful, but he is defeated, and his pride is gone. Aeneas checks his sword. But then he sees that Turnus is wearing the baldric that he had stripped from the body of Pallas, the slain son of Evander; Aeneas flies into a rage and, shouting that it is Pallas himself who takes Turnus' life in sacrifice, plunges his sword into his enemy's chest. In the last line of the poem, Turnus' "soul fled in resentment down to the shades."

Some readers feel that the poem ends without ambiguity. About half of these readers feel that Aeneas had to kill Turnus, that he was right to do so, and that the ending is triumphant in every sense. The other half feel that killing Turnus amounts to a moral failure on Aeneas' part, an abandonment of enlightened principles—enlightened, that is, in comparison to the code of the Homeric warrior or to the attitudes that kept Rome at civil war for nearly a century—and a surrender to the forces of fury and unreason that have opposed him throughout the poem. For

still other readers, the design of this ending and the strongly opposed reactions that it evokes in knowledgeable readers mark it as consummately ambiguous: a moral puzzle for readers rather than a straightforward celebration or condemnation of a particular act.

Despite its literary power, its influence on later poets, and its unassailably canonical status, the *Aeneid* remains unfinished. When it had reached virtually the state in which we read it today, Virgil (the *vitae* tell us) determined to travel through Greece and Asia Minor for a period of three years, polishing the poem before presenting it to Augustus and releasing it to the public. At the outset of his final sojourn, Virgil is said to have encountered Augustus in Athens and to have agreed to return with him to Italy. But he immediately contracted the disease that ended his life. It is said that on his deathbed in Brundisium he requested that his unfinished masterpiece be burned, but Augustus, handing the poem over to Varius Rufus, ordered him to prepare it for publication. Varius may have removed a four-line *sphragis*, the so-called “pre-proemium,” from the very beginning of the poem, along with a major episode in book 2 in which Aeneas contemplates vengefully murdering a defenseless Helen during the sack of Troy. Some scholars, however, argue that one or both of these passages were composed by other poets after Virgil's death and then mistakenly accepted as genuine by ancient commentators. However much he actually suppressed, Varius seems not to have added anything to the poem. A large number of incomplete verses (“half lines”)—many of them hauntingly beautiful—have been allowed to stand, along with other passages that some scholars believe lack the author's final touch (the *ultima manus*). But the general finish of the poem is so high that critics treat it in essence as if it reflected Virgil's final intentions.

## Legacy.

The first words in the *Eclogues* are spoken by someone whom a soldier has driven from his home. This is Aeneas' situation at the beginning of the *Aeneid*, but at the end it is he who uses force to win himself and his people a new home at another's expense. The themes of journey into exile, of endurance, and of loss thus span Virgil's entire oeuvre. But so do the themes of new beginnings, selfless devotion, and nobility of purpose. The beauty of Virgil's poetry sometimes reveals itself in its simplicity, but more often in complexity. Different readers take from it different lessons; few can fail to recognize its capacity to enlarge one's experience of the world, morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually. Whatever its meaning for its original audience, Virgil's poetry has become an education in itself and a touchstone of literary excellence for readers of diverse perspective over the past two thousand years, and it seems likely to long endure.

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